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Commentary on Allan

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In Response To: Allan Randall's *Layered protocols in coalescent argumentation*

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Allan Randall provides an alternative account of argumentation theory which relies on a biological model based on his colleague M. Martin Taylor's account of William Powers" perceptual control theory (PCT). What is interesting and most useful about this piece is the attempt to integrate argument into a more general understanding of human behaviour. Randall, quite right, presents argument as an activity which must be understood as part of the strategies we use in human relations. Like Gilbert, he emphasizes the goal-oriented nature of argument. Important questions can be raised, however, about this kind of treatment.

1. Does the biological model work?

Randall's account is not based on biology but on a theoretical model which attempts to explain biological behaviour. Living organisms are "irritable." They respond to their environments in ways which ensure or promote their survival. This basic biological fact is open to more than one interpretation. Power's perceptual control theory is one attempt to understand and explain how and why this occurs.

Given his interest in biology and his encyclopaedic commentaries, it is not surprising to see Aristotle cited as the forefather of Powers' perceptual control theory. But Powers turns Aristotle into an idealist. Randall writes: "Powers...follows a similar line of reasoning to that of his ancient Greek forefather, recognizing that the variable under control cannot be a variable 'out there' in the world, but must be an internal variable, namely a perception." Randall uses the word "perception," in its broadest sense, to refer to any kind of mental event or state. But Aristotle is a realist. Aristotle would, more likely, argue that organisms are not trying to control their perceptions of the external world. They are trying, more simply, to control the external world. Or again, that they are trying to control themselves in response to the external world.

The idea that we can filter and analyse the world into racially incommensurable objects or perceptions seems more reminiscent of Quine than Aristotle. Aristotle argues for natural kinds and for metaphysical unity.

2. Humanity?

One may wonder how convincingly one can apply the notion of perceptual control to say plant life or the lowly amoeba. At this point we seem to have something that resembles mechanism more than higher-level perception. But more to the point, are human beings purely biological? There are questions here of free will, of intentionality, of meaning, consciousness, and morality.

On Power's model, behaviour is an attempt to manipulate or control the environment so as to achieve our higher level goals. Randall uses the example of a driver who looks attentively at the road so as to control the steering wheel so that he can get to work so that he can be filthy rich so that he can (presumably) be happy beyond his wildest dreams and so on. But this is a one-sided—a Western, liberal, pragmatic, Baconian way of viewing human behaviour.

A Buddhist monk, on the path to desirelessness, is not trying to control the world. This is the path of mayo, of suffering and discontent. Lao Tzu, the Taoist philosopher, says to surrender to nature. Don't try to impose your will on it. Ancient Stoics and skeptics would agree. On the perceptual control model, they are just deceiving themselves about their real intentions; they lack self-knowledge.

What about aesthetic contemplation.? Is this an attempt to conquer the world or, as Schopenhauer thought, attempt to move beyond the relentless mechanism of biology into something higher? And what about altruistic love? Is my love for my daughter nothing more than a disguised attempt at controlling my environment? The biological model provides a reductionist view of human endeavour. If the goal of argument entails, as Gilbert suggests, resolving emotional, social disagreement, perhaps we need to see in human endeavour the potential for something beyond self-centred manipulation.

3. The Role of Epistemology

Randall suggests that when we argue with others, we need to find out what they are trying to achieve in terms of their higher level goals. Fair enough. But what if their goal is not to control others or their environment? What if their goal is to uncover knowledge, to achieve true justified belief? This is, traditionally, the purpose of philosophical argument. On Randall's biological model, this is at best an apparent goal of argument. It is not what argument is really about.

Randall writes: "Just as in general human behaviour is the control of perception, communication in particular is, according to Taylor, the control of belief." On the perceptual control model, argumentation is a power struggle. X is trying to control the beliefs of Y and Y is trying to control the beliefs of X. We are left with a conflict-resolution method of argumentation. The goal is sharing, co-operation, equality, mutual respect, empathy, merging, the preservation of self-esteem, and so on. Randall disparages a logical, epistemological model of argument and, along with Gilbert, proposes a goal-oriented, human relations model of argument therapy in its stead.

One can agree that many (most?) arguments that occur outside and *inside* the academic arena have to do with some kind of implicit power struggle, but is this all there is to it? If the participants in an argument come to agree, if their belief systems coalesce, grow and merge into one another, if they experience empathy and sharing to the highest degree, the process they are involved in is still egregiously unsuccessful if it does not result in true justified belief.

Argument has an epistemological goal and this goal cannot be set aside. Otherwise we come up with an account of something which is not what philosophical argumentation is, at the very least, supposed to be about.

On Randall's social therapy model, winning and losing are put aside. The desire to persuade, to win one's point, must give way to the desire to agree. This is a commendable and highly moral recommendation. If, however, argument has an epistemological component, there is a sense in which it is utterly beside the point. After all, two arguers who come to complete agreement may still be utterly mistaken about their beliefs. Losing an argument may be a blow to our own sense of self-esteem. If, however, argumentation is about uncovering falsehoods, inconsistencies, prejudices, simplifications and such like, losing an argument may be a healthy experience after all. We need to recover the Socratic notion that the person who loses an argument wins because they walk away having learnt something new.

Gilbert and Randall do provide an insightful account of the context in which arguments take place. Using extended diagramming techniques so as to clarify hidden goals and beliefs is a worthwhile and instructive endeavour. At the same time, we need a model of argumentation that takes epistemology seriously.

4. Non-propositional arguments

Randall argues, correctly I believe, that beliefs are not all explicitly propositional. He also contends that arguments revolve about incompatibilities rather than logical inconsistencies in competing belief systems. He gives the following example of a non-propositional argument involving an incompatibility rather than an inconsistency.

Bill: I think your dress is too flashy.

Susan: Well, it's what I'm in the mood for today.

Imagine, however, how the conversation might proceed:

Susan: Well, it's what I'm in the mood for today.

Bill: Well you shouldn't be in that kind of mood.

Susan: Why not?

Bill: It's immodest.

Susan: Well, I don't think it's immodest.

As it turns out (in this imagined case), we do have a logical inconsistency at the bottom of Susan and Bill's disagreement. Bill is arguing that the proposition "The blue dress is immodest," is true. Susan is arguing that the proposition "The blue dress is immodest," is false. But the same propositional

cannot be both true and false. Hence their disagreement.

Although many of our beliefs are implicit in our actions, this does not mean that they cannot be made explicit and parsed out in terms of traditional propositional logic. Surely, this process of recovering and rendering explicit implicit belief is an integral part of Gilbert's coalescent argument therapy.

5. Making and using models in philosophy

Randall's presentation brings to the fore questions about the role of theoretical models in the philosophical enterprise. Scientific models are necessary, in part, because scientists need to predict say, the movement of a viscous fluid through a semi-permeable membrane or the behaviour of a whooping crane during a mating ritual. But prediction is not the same thing as explanation. Randall provides a model of "trashing" that looks like some kind of sin function that oscillates around a median value. This provides a loose analogy with the kind of vigorous back and forth disagreement which may occur in certain emotionally tense situations, but there are too many variables here and not enough information to operationalize this kind of phenomenon in any precise way. Dressing up insights in mathematical or scientific terminology does not in itself shed light on the issue. We must keep in mind that all models are ultimately reductionist in nature. They tend to obscure as well as explain the complex facets of human behaviour.

Randall's presentation is an interesting attempt to enlarge argumentation theory beyond traditional boundaries. One needs to continue this kind of investigation while, at the same time, preserving and accounting for the epistemological role of both practical and theoretical argument.